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ABSTRACT

In this paper, an attempt is made to establish a hierarchical order of purpose for the elementary school principalship. In rank order, these purposes are (1) clinical supervision, whose central purposes are the improvement of instruction utilizing objective systematic feedback techniques and effective knowledge of group dynamics; (2) professional dialogue with staff in the planning of curriculum and the implementation of curricular programs; and (3) management functions. It is the author's contention that the impetus for change within education is strong enough to ultimately bring about the abolition of the building principalship. He advocates, therefore, that the educational profession should formulate guidelines for inservice education of career administrators, establish a hierarchical order of function for the role of the principalship, develop a clearinghouse system for identification of innovative programs, and come to grips with the political realities of the movement within education to abolish or circumvent the principalship. (Author/WM)

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by

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SHOULD WE ABOLISH OR RETAIN THE PRINCIPALSHIP?

In my estimation, there exists in today's school organization a frightening inadequacy of specialized training and an abundance of natural talent on the part of the elementary principal. In most cases, the men and women who have risen to the principalship have done so with many talents totally unrelated to their only real purpose within the educational arena--the improvement of instruction. Instead, many of these men and women have risen to their positions because they have been recognized as potential leaders with a flair for organizational detail and have been given managerial posts within the school organization. Today the talents of managerial aptitude are not considered adequate for the role of the elementary principal.

In this paper an attempt will be made to establish in rank order a hierarchical order of purpose for the principalship: (1) clinical supervision whose central purposes are the improvement of instruction utilizing objective systematic feedback techniques and effective knowledge of group dynamics, (2) professional dialogue with staff in planning of curriculum and implementation of curricular programs, and (3) functions of management.

Educational literature in the past abounded with notions that the primary role of the principal was and should be that of educational leader of his building. The term "educational leader" was defined as the person who performs those tasks related to supervision and curriculum development

which are necessary to maintain a contemporary and effective educational program and allow a reasonable openness of the human climate within the school. However, research tells us that the principal has become less and less involved with his primary function and more and more involved with the mundane tasks of managerial consequence. He operates in his present status in a totally different posture from the one defined above; his present role is pragmatic and markedly influenced by two major factors: (1) his formal training in educational administration, and (2) his on-the-job experiences.

Foundations of the Problem

Most of the current crop of career administrators have received their training prior to the advent of the new clinical supervisory techniques designed to minimize teacher intimidation and jeopardy in the evaluation and appraisal process. Many training institutions have adopted these new techniques into their training programs but the effects have been slow to "trickle" down to the building level. Even when supervisors have received the new training, they have met resistance from the entrenched system of managers. Occasionally, one will find an enlightened principal who on his own initiative has made the effort to return to campus for retraining, and some school districts have effected mass training programs whereby all supervisory personnel could attend retraining programs. But at best the total picture is sporadic and wrought with inconsistencies and this in an area which is undoubtedly one of the most important single areas of the school system.

With the advent of teacher cohesiveness and its resulting concomitant power base, the role of principal as school manager has been challenged. Current educational literature advocates the abolishment of the principalship as educational leader and, as alternatives, the establishment of curriculum leaders or teams with leaders or differentiated staffing.

Directions for Amelioration

That the position of the school principal should be abolished seems to be a totally inappropriate suggestion, which does not consider the very pragmatic political realities of the present educational world. Instead, a systematic program should be adopted to update the skills of the existing principals and attempt to influence the educational training institutions to modify their present programs. Furthermore, not only should the training institutions begin to provide updated supervisory training for administrators, but they should fulfill another obligation which they have traditionally neglected--inservice training for administrators.

On-the-job inservice training for career administrators has now been accepted as a vital necessity by the educational profession, but the accomplishment of this task is still wrought with tradition-bound unrealities. The training institutions today still operate under the assumption that the road to retraining is one way; candidates must still "make the trek," so to speak, to a campus institution to receive the educational benefits. This arrangement is probably satisfactory for those school districts that can afford this luxury, but the smaller districts that cannot afford it, or find financial excuses for their lack of awareness, will not participate.

Obviously, it is not suggested that institutional training centers be abolished, but it is strongly recommended that the training institutions should perform most inservice functions within the public school environment rather than to expect highly motivated career educators to take the one-way road to retraining. By performing the retraining function within the school districts, two positive factors in the program would be achieved:

(1) Inservice programs conducted within the school districts would force instructors to be more realistic and sensitive to the needs of career administrators.

(2) Inservice programs within districts would spur the reluctant, not-so-motivated, well-entrenched principal to participate in new and better methods of supervision and curriculum development.

Inservice Relevance

The key to a meaningful experience for career administrators in inservice programs is relevance. As educators we talk about relevance, but do we practice what we preach? How can we "plug in" relevance? Let's take a look at our brothers in industry. What does General Motors do to update their service personnel to the latest carburetor and transmission design? They conduct an inservice program that (a) is short in duration, (b) assumes that the men involved have intuition and basic skills, and (c) allows the learners to learn by doing--provides active participation.

In light of these guidelines, what lament is heard most frequently by teachers and administrators about "taking courses" from the nearby college or university? Here are examples:

(a) The course was too long.

(b) Old so-and-so hasn't been in a classroom for years--how does he know?

(c) I don't need the credits anyway.

(d) I can't afford the costs of the course.

(e) They could have covered the material in half the time--why waste my precious time?

These laments reflect the converse of the described process used in industry.

How then do we attack this problem? Obviously, what is needed is periodic inservice training to keep educators abreast of the latest developments and/or of some developments that have suffered "innovative lag," ideas which have not sifted down to the "grassroots of implementation." In regard to the latter, I believe that administrative training institutions are making some fallacious basic assumptions.

Specifically, it is not enough to ask any local educator what he feels are essential needs in his school system. Let me give an example to illustrate my point. When I came to the Rogue Valley area, I could easily have assumed that clinical supervision and a systematic feedback system to improve instruction were already known and practiced. This assumption couldn't have been further from the truth. In fact, it was little known and seldom used. If those in authority had been asked to list a hierarchy of needs, most of them would not have volunteered a systematic feedback system as having great validity for the ongoing evaluation and appraisal of the teaching-learning process.

Therefore, it would be wise to assess carefully the source of feedback before any decisions are made for inservice. Such assessment--quite easily

achieved simply by talking to the person and/or checking his recency of training, travel, etc.--would tend to sift out feedback which has its roots deeply implanted in authoritarianism and lack of awareness.

Guidelines for Inservice Programs

Practical inservice training should follow a few simple guidelines:

(1) Do not assume that innovation has reached the grassroots level.

(2) Keep the time factor down to a minimum.

(3) Assume that the people involved have some basic skills, intuition, and expertise.

(4) Make careful assessments of feedback before planning inservice.

(5) Develop a consortium proposal among districts which will (a) allow inservice programs to bring in the "reluctant" districts, and (b) help defray expenses for high-powered lecturers.

(6) Conduct the inservice program during the working day.

(7) Plan for active participation among the administrators themselves.

(8) Remember that high-powered, successful practitioners are more readily accepted as instructors at the "grassroots" level.

(9) Remember that the indicator of relevance can be the assessment of feedback. The material presented should meet the criteria above to be relevant and this feedback is almost always instantaneous after each session.

In the actual implementation of an inservice training program, certain basic factors should be understood and accepted or inservice trainers will become discouraged with their efforts and progress. Of special importance are the several stages a person must undergo in order to fully accept and utilize a new idea or program.

Acceptance of innovation has been described by anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, educators, and others. The process can be illustrated by using the psychology of successful merchandising. At first, a person is made aware of the product; then he becomes informed about the product over a period of time while he shops and/or listens to feedback; and finally, he adopts the product. This process takes time.

For lack of understanding of these three phases, the one-day "shot in the arm" is often dropped because the feedback and observations have left the trainers discouraged. I would suggest that they not be discouraged and that short presentations for "meaningful awareness" may be extremely valuable to some of the participants. To increase the meaningfulness of short- or long-term inservice programs, the trainer should plan activities to involve the participants.

Relevance is a key word in the teacher-pupil learning process; it should not be abandoned in inservice training sessions of principals. The 3M Company has recently designed a learning package for supervisors which involves participants in actual "doing" and provides technical construction and capabilities of overhead transparencies. This company has assessed the feedback and abandoned their lecture-type inservice program for the learning-by-doing process.

It should be further noted that simulation-type learning techniques can be useful tools in the retraining process. Simulation, a learning process, seems to be a new word in the teaching profession, but many organizations, such as the armed forces and other high skill occupations, have used the technique for years. Simulation games which attempt to "plug in" relevance by means of the "dry run" technique, have been and

will continue to be a most effective technique in the learning process. Again, the school organization as a whole has been the "Johnny-come-lately" in their promotion and emphasis of simulation-learning.

Professional Improvement vs. Innovative Programs

Another factor which seriously hinders the effectiveness of the principal is the pursuit of innovation. While many principals may choose to ignore curricular problems, others can be seen feverishly pursuing new gadgets and notions, trying to breach innovative lag, "getting on the band wagon" with ill-advised haste.

If we believe what research tells us, educators, principals included, should make some basic assumptions and establish priorities in terms of professional improvement of staff versus pursuit of innovative programs. Research indicates that the teaching-learning process is influenced by the quality of the teachers rather than by the kind and type of program utilized. If these findings are valid, educators would give top priority to the improvement of instruction, above the pursuit and adoption of innovative programs. "Improve instruction and we shall improve learning" would be the motto of the principal, the supervisor, and the central office administration. It is not my intent to minimize the importance of new programs because their implementation achieves many purposes including the mental health of teachers. My intent is to maximize the function of teacher improvement because it appears to be either sadly neglected or specifically entrusted to those who function in an atmosphere of paternalism. And it is this kind of atmosphere which becomes the breeding ground of discontent and teacher militancy, the very climate which fosters movements to abolish the principalship.

New programs have become cloaked in an aura of mystery. In fact, the introduction of "countless" new programs in education has had a debilitating rather than a beneficial effect on the profession. It is my opinion that the wave of new programs has turned the principal away from the most important single purpose of his existence in the building, i.e., the coordination of teacher improvement. Asking the principal to evaluate or keep up with every new program is like asking the medical doctor to analyze each new drug he prescribes. The task is an impossible one. Rather than rushing helter-skelter from one new program to another and feeling guilty because he cannot hope to know them all, I suggest the principal adopt a system of evaluating programs. Using this method will tend to sustain a healthy educational atmosphere, and relieve his own guilt feelings until such time as the education profession can establish a clearinghouse through more effective research and development programs.

New programs focus on several learning processes or combinations of these. Using the area of reading as an illustration, we can identify processes which have been incorporated into developmental reading programs and place them into such categories as: (a) identification of a deficiency, e.g. perceptual ability; (b) incorporation of behavioristic learning theories, e.g. programmed learning; (c) retracing of the patterns of development of the mind in learning, e.g. psycholinguistics; (d) inductive and deductive learning processes, etc. Understanding the theoretical possibilities based upon the teaching-learning process, the educator can translate the myriad of reading programs on the market into identifiable categories and simplify the confusing array of new programs being developed. Then, as a knowledgeable supervisor, the principal can place greater emphasis

upon the improvement of instruction and secondary emphasis on new programs, software, and hardware. While this position might not be considered fashionable in terms of present day media developers and recent mergers of big business into the education market, I believe it is based on sound educational philosophy.

The principal does not have to be replaced with a supervisor specialist; he can become the supervisor and coordinator of a team dedicated to the improvement of instruction. Opponents of this viewpoint are unnerved at a basic question that I have often posed: "If you were the principal, would you be able to handle the supervisory function?" The answer is invariably, "Yes, but--" That answer means "Yes" in terms of the supervisory duties and "No" in terms of managerial duties. My answer is, "You need not spend more than one-fourth of your precious time allocation of managerial functions if you organize properly."

Why do I put so much stock in retraining building principals with updated skills in supervision? Political realities dictate that we must work through, rather than circumvent, the principalship. Circumvention of the principal as an educational leader could occur when the profession ceases to credential administrators, and business manager/clerks are hired to replace the principal. Political realities demand that the principal deal with his staff, specifically by maintaining an open climate, hiring and rehiring personnel and supporting the security of the staff without intimidation or jeopardy. An enlightened principal is more secure and apt to permit an open climate which would ameliorate paternalism and its concomitant anti-humanistic elements.

However, without the skills necessary for a systematic feedback system to improve instruction, the teacher and principal are worlds apart. There are universal behaviors which are considered in the profession as marks of good teaching and which cut across grade level and subject matter. Of these, every principal should be aware.

A well-defined process of evaluation and appraisal utilizing a systematic feedback procedure must first be accomplished, but knowledge of group dynamics and effective interpersonal relations techniques are strong corollaries. A systematic feedback setup without the utilization of effective group dynamics would be like a "clobber in the head." It might be purposeful, but extremely painful. A wise principal will establish this hierarchy: strong emphasis upon professional improvement taking precedence over implementation of innovative programs. Armed with an array of objective instruments designed to improve instruction, equipped with the knowledge needed for effective interpersonal relationships, utilizing an established policy of evaluation and appraisal, the principal can now pursue the necessary dialogue which is essential to professional staff communication. It is upon this foundation that an open climate can best be built. It is upon this foundation of professional dialogue that effective pursuit of innovative programs can be established.

It is my opinion that unless our profession (a) formulates guidelines for inservice education of career administrators, (b) established a hierarchical order of function for the role of the principalship, (c) develops a clearinghouse system for identification of innovative programs, and (d) comes to grips with the political realities of the movement within education to abolish or circumvent the principalship, change will occur--possibly strong enough and persuasive enough to abolish the building principalship.